The New Avignon: Realpolitik, Moral Authority, and the Diplomatic Rupture Between the United States and the Holy See in the Post-Secular Era

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The reported January 2026 confrontation between the United States Department of War and the Holy See represents the most significant breakdown in Westphalian diplomatic norms in the twenty-first century. At the center of this crisis is an alleged ultimatum delivered by Under Secretary of War Elbridge Colby to Cardinal Christophe Pierre, asserting that American military primacy supersedes the moral and territorial sovereignty of the Catholic Church. This assertion, coupled with a provocative reference to the fourteenth-century Avignon Papacy, suggests a fundamental shift in American foreign policy from traditional soft-power engagement to a doctrine of absolute coercion. This paper examines the theological and geopolitical underpinnings of this rift, specifically focusing on the "State of the World" address by Pope Leo XIV and the subsequent American response. By analyzing the rebranding of the Department of Defense back to the Department of War and the rise of a new school of aggressive realism, we explore how the United States' pursuit of hegemony has placed it on a collision course with the oldest continuous diplomatic entity in the world. The resulting fallout—including the cancellation of the Pope's visit to the American 250th-anniversary celebrations—signals a new era where moral authority and military might are no longer in uneasy equilibrium, but in open conflict.

Keywords: Elbridge Colby, Pope Leo XIV, US-Vatican Relations, Department of War, Realpolitik, Avignon Papacy, Cardinal Christophe Pierre, Religious Diplomacy, Hegemony, 2026 Geopolitics.

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1. Introduction: The Pentagon Summons and the Rhetoric of Force

The landscape of international relations in 2026 has been fundamentally reshaped by a single, high-stakes encounter that remained hidden from the public eye for months. On April 8, 2026, investigative reports from The Free Press and The Letters from Leo brought to light a confrontation that occurred in late January at the newly renamed Department of War. The reports detailed a closed-door meeting where Elbridge Colby, the Under Secretary of War for Policy, allegedly delivered a chilling ultimatum to Cardinal Christophe Pierre, the Apostolic Nuncio to the United States. This meeting was not a routine diplomatic exchange; it was a summons. According to leaked accounts, Colby and his colleagues informed the Cardinal that the United States possessed the military power to act at its own discretion globally and that the Catholic Church was expected to align its moral and diplomatic weight with American strategic interests. This moment, characterized by a blunt dismissal of traditional soft-power norms, marks a decisive rupture in the centuries-old relationship between the American Republic and the Holy See.

The genesis of this confrontation lies in the January 9, 2026, "State of the World" address delivered by Pope Leo XIV. As the first American-born pontiff, Leo XIV's election was initially greeted by some in Washington with the hope of a more sympathetic ear for American exceptionalism. However, his address proved to be a stinging rebuke of the current administration's foreign policy. The Pope criticized what he described as a diplomacy based on force rather than consensus and warned that a global zeal for war was spreading like a contagion. To the architects of the new American realism within the Department of War, these comments were not merely theological reflections but direct challenges to U.S. national security and the legitimacy of its military operations abroad, particularly in the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific. The summons of Cardinal Pierre was intended to suppress this dissent, yet it instead catalyzed a diplomatic crisis that has resonated through every level of global governance.

The rhetoric employed during the meeting represents a stark departure from the linguistic traditions of American diplomacy. For decades, the United States maintained an "uneasy peace" with the Vatican's moral critiques by framing its actions in the language of human rights, democracy, and collective security. The 2026 ultimatum stripped away these euphemisms. By allegedly stating that the United States has the military power to do whatever it wants and that the Church had better take its side, the administration signaled a transition to a raw, transactional realism. This "Colby Doctrine" suggests that in a world of shifting hegemonies and renewed great power competition, moral authority is viewed as an obstacle to be neutralized rather than a partner to be engaged. The inclusion of a historical reference to the Avignon Papacy—a period when the French monarchy effectively captured the papacy to ensure its

subservience—was interpreted by the Holy See not as a casual academic remark, but as a modern threat of coercion against a sovereign religious state.

The fallout from the publication of these reports has been swift and profound. The Vatican's response was not delivered through a press release, but through a significant shift in the Pope's itinerary. Pope Leo XIV, who was expected to be the guest of honor at the United States' 250th-anniversary celebrations in Philadelphia, officially canceled his visit. This move was a historical anomaly; a Pope of American origin refusing to visit his homeland for its greatest milestone. Furthermore, his decision to spend July 4th, 2026, on the island of Lampedusa—a site that has become synonymous with the global migrant crisis—was a masterful stroke of symbolic resistance. By choosing the frontier of human suffering over the halls of imperial celebration, the Pope effectively drew a line in the sand between the "Gospel of Power" and the "Gospel of the Marginalized."

This paper seeks to analyze the multi-layered implications of this rupture. It begins by examining the structural changes within the American defense establishment, specifically the rebranding of the Department of War and the rise of a particular school of realist thought that prioritizes absolute military primacy over moral consensus. It will then explore the papacy of Leo XIV, investigating how his Chicago roots and Augustinian formation prepared him to confront the very power structures he was born into. A significant portion of this analysis is dedicated to the historical weight of the Avignon reference, exploring why such a specific medieval parallel has caused so much alarm in the Roman Curia. Finally, we will consider the long-term strategic consequences of this schism, asking whether a United States that has abandoned its reliance on moral soft power can maintain its global standing when it is in open conflict with the world's most influential religious institution.

The introduction of such coercive rhetoric into the diplomatic sphere signals more than just a passing disagreement between a president and a pope. It indicates a fundamental shift in the Westphalian order, where the distinction between secular might and moral sovereignty is being erased in favor of a singular, unipolar will. As the world watches the unfolding drama of 2026, the question is no longer just how many divisions the Pope has, but whether a superpower can survive a total divorce from the moral guardrails that have historically tempered its use of force. Through an interdisciplinary lens of history, political science, and theology, this paper will argue that the "New Avignon" threat represents a dangerous gamble that may ultimately isolate the United States from its traditional allies and the very moral foundations it claims to defend.

2. The Rebirth of the Department of War: Structural Shifts in American Hegemony

The transition from the Department of Defense back to its ancestral title, the Department of War, in late 2025 was far more than a cosmetic rebranding exercise; it signaled a fundamental pivot in the American state's self-conception and its posture toward the international community. For nearly eight decades, the nomenclature of defense served as a linguistic shield, framing military activity within a reactive and protective paradigm consistent with the post-World War II liberal order. By reverting to the Department of War via executive order on September 5, 2025, the administration explicitly discarded the euphemistic constraints of the twentieth century. This structural shift was designed to communicate a new era of strategic clarity, where military force is recognized not merely as a tool of last resort for protection, but as a primary instrument of national will. The administrative restoration of the War Office reflects a belief among current leadership that the global security environment has returned to a state of raw, Hobbesian competition that requires an equally raw and honest institutional framework.

2.1. From Defense to War: The Rebranding of National Security

The legislative and executive rationale for the renaming was rooted in a critique of the perceived "mission creep" and bureaucratic inertia of the Department of Defense. Critics of the previous era argued that the term defense had become a catch-all for global policing, nation-building, and humanitarian interventions that lacked a clear connection to the tangible interests of the American citizenry. In contrast, the Department of War was resurrected to focus the nation's martial resources on what the 2026 National Defense Strategy calls "decisive deterrence and absolute resolve." This rebranding was accompanied by a significant consolidation of power within the Office of the Secretary of War, currently held by Pete Hegseth, and a streamlining of the command structure to prioritize kinetic readiness over administrative oversight.

This shift has profound implications for the United States' diplomatic language. In the Department of War's internal culture, the emphasis has moved away from the multilateral cooperation and "interoperability" that defined the NATO-centric years. Instead, the focus is now on unilateral capability and the Credibility of Force. The renaming serves as a psychological signal to both allies and adversaries that the United States is no longer bound by the norms of a "defensive" posture. In this context, the summons of Cardinal Pierre to the Pentagon—not a state department office, but the heart of the military establishment—was a deliberate choice. It was intended to show that the Vatican's moral objections were being weighed not as diplomatic nuances, but as potential strategic vulnerabilities to be addressed by the War Office.

2.2. The Intellectual Origins of the New Realism

The intellectual architecture of this new era is largely defined by a group of strategists who champion a doctrine known as "Flexible Realism." At the forefront of this movement is Elbridge Colby, the Under Secretary of War for Policy. Colby's influential work, specifically his 2021 treatise on the strategy of denial, laid the groundwork for a foreign policy that rejects "liberal internationalism" in favor of a hard-nosed prioritization of theaters. In the 2026 iteration of this philosophy, the doctrine has evolved into a more aggressive variant. This "New Realism" posits that in a multipolar world characterized by the rise of peer competitors and the fragmentation of global institutions, the United States must exert its will through a combination of economic leverage and uncontested military primacy.

This school of thought views moral or religious intervention in geopolitics with deep skepticism. From the perspective of the new realist establishment, the Holy See's emphasis on "universal fraternity" and its critique of "imperialist occupation" are seen as "aspirational distractions" that undermine the cold logic of deterrence. The intellectual origins of this stance can be traced back to a neo-Stalinist interpretation of power, where influence is measured strictly in terms of "divisions" and the ability to project force. The architects of the current policy argue that the United States has spent too long seeking the approval of "moralizing" international actors while its actual power was being eroded by over-extension. Consequently, the rhetoric used by Colby in his January meeting—asserting that the Church "had better take its side"—is the logical conclusion of a worldview that sees the international arena as a zero-sum game where moral neutrality is synonymous with opposition. This intellectual shift represents a total departure from the "Just War" tradition that had previously provided a common, if strained, vocabulary for dialogue between Washington and Rome. Instead, the administration has embraced a pre-Westphalian concept of power, where the sovereign's right to act is limited only by their capability to do so.

3. Pope Leo XIV: The American Pontificate and the Critique of Imperialism

The election of Pope Leo XIV in the autumn of 2025 sent shockwaves through the global political landscape, particularly within the United States. Born in the vibrant, blue-collar neighborhoods of Chicago, the former Cardinal Archbishop of that city became the first American to ascend to the Chair of Saint Peter. His elevation was initially viewed by the Washington establishment as a potential diplomatic coup—a native son who understood the nuances of American power and could perhaps bridge the growing divide between the secular West and the spiritual authority of Rome. However, Leo XIV quickly proved to be a complex and independent figure. Eschewing the traditional European aristocratic aloofness often associated

with the papacy, he brought a distinctly Midwestern directness to his role, coupled with a deep, uncompromising commitment to the social teachings of the Church. His papacy has been defined not by an endorsement of American exceptionalism, but by a rigorous, theological critique of how that exceptionalism is exercised on the world stage.

3.1. A Native Son's Rebuke: The January 9th Address

The tension between the new administration and the Vatican reached a boiling point on January 9, 2026, during the Pope's first "State of the World" address to the diplomatic corps. This annual speech, traditionally a moment for the Holy See to outline its global priorities, was transformed by Leo XIV into a blistering indictment of contemporary geopolitics. Speaking in the Hall of Benedictions, the Pope bypassed the usual pleasantries to warn that "war is back in vogue" and that a "dangerous zeal for war" was spreading among the world's most powerful nations. While he did not name the United States directly in every sentence, his targets were unmistakable. He lamented the total collapse of the post-World War II international order—an order designed to prevent the use of force to violate sovereign borders—and argued that this framework was being systematically dismantled by those who once claimed to be its guardians.

Leo's critique was particularly pointed regarding "imperialist occupation" and "diplomacy based on force." To the ears of the Pentagon and the Department of War, these were not merely moral abstractions but direct attacks on current U.S. military operations in the Middle East and the escalating tensions in the Indo-Pacific. The Pope's insistence that "dialogue and consensus" were being replaced by the raw exercise of power hit a raw nerve in a Washington currently obsessed with "decisive deterrence." The irony of a Pope from Chicago standing in the heart of Rome to tell his former countrymen that their reliance on military might was a form of "moral regression" was lost on no one. This address served as the primary catalyst for the summons of Cardinal Pierre, as the administration sought to understand if this was a temporary rhetorical flourish or the beginning of a sustained papal opposition to American interests.

3.2. Theology of Peace vs. Diplomacy of Force

At the heart of Leo XIV's friction with the United States is a fundamental clash of worldviews: a Theology of Peace versus a Diplomacy of Force. For the Department of War, peace is a condition achieved through overwhelming strength and the credible threat of violence. For Leo XIV, peace is not merely the absence of war, but the "tranquility of order" achieved through justice and the protection of the most vulnerable. During his address, the Pope made frequent references to the "invisible victims" of modern conflict, focusing on the destruction of hospitals, energy grids, and civilian infrastructure—actions he categorized as serious violations of international humanitarian law. This focus on the human cost of "strategic interests" directly challenged the

sanitized, technocratic language used by the Department of War to justify its expanded global footprint.

Furthermore, Leo XIV has integrated his American identity into his critique, using his understanding of the American "will to power" to deconstruct it from within. He has often spoken of the "blindness of the powerful," suggesting that nations with the most military hardware are often the most spiritually impoverished when it comes to resolving the root causes of global instability. His advocacy for refugees and migrants, which he frames as a mandatory Christian duty, stands in stark opposition to the administration's securitization of borders and its view of migration as a tactical threat. By elevating the dignity of the migrant over the sovereignty of the state, Leo XIV has positioned the Church as a counter-hegemonic force. The struggle between Rome and Washington in 2026 is therefore not just a dispute over specific policies, but a profound disagreement over what constitutes "order" in a fractured world. The Pope's theology suggests that true security can never be built on the barrels of guns, a message that the architects of the new American realism find not only naive but dangerously subversive.

4. Analyzing the "Avignon" Threat: Historical Precedents and Coercive Diplomacy

The most explosive element of the reported meeting at the Pentagon was not merely the assertion of raw military power, but the specific historical parallel allegedly invoked by American officials: the Avignon Papacy. To a secular observer, this might seem like an obscure academic footnote, but within the walls of the Apostolic Palace, the reference is understood as a direct and existential threat. By resurrecting the specter of the fourteenth-century crisis, the Department of War signaled that it views the Holy See not as an untouchable moral arbiter, but as a political entity whose independence is ultimately a privilege granted—or revoked—by the dominant superpower of the age.

4.1. The 1309 Precedent: When Kings Subordinated Popes

The Avignon Papacy, often referred to as the Babylonian Captivity of the Church, began in 1309 when Pope Clement V, a Frenchman, moved the papal court to the city of Avignon. This transition was the culmination of a brutal power struggle between the French monarchy and the Roman Curia. King Philip IV of France, known as Philip the Fair, had engaged in a prolonged conflict with Pope Boniface VIII over the right of the state to tax the clergy and the King's refusal to acknowledge papal supremacy in temporal matters. The conflict escalated until Philip's agents physically assaulted the Pope at Anagni, an event that shattered the prestige of the medieval papacy.

Following the death of Boniface and the brief reign of his successor, the election of Clement V marked the beginning of nearly seventy years of French dominance over the papacy. During this time, the popes resided in Avignon rather than Rome, and the College of Cardinals became heavily stacked with French appointees. The papacy effectively became an arm of the French crown, its diplomatic and financial resources used to support French interests in European conflicts. For the Church, this era remains a symbol of "captivity"—a period where spiritual authority was forcibly subordinated to the geopolitical ambitions of a secular sovereign. In the context of 2026, invoking this history is an intentional reminder that when the Church's moral stance interferes with the objectives of a Great Power, that Power possesses the historical and physical means to "capture" the institution.

4.2. Modern Implications of the Avignon Reference

In the modern diplomatic theater, the reference to Avignon serves as a psychological weapon. By allegedly suggesting that the Catholic Church had better take the side of the United States or face a similar historical fate, officials in the Department of War were proposing a "New Avignon"—a situation where the Holy See's global influence is either co-opted or contained by American force. This is not a threat of a physical invasion of Vatican City, but rather a threat of total diplomatic and logistical isolation. In a world where the United States controls the global financial plumbing and maritime security, the "Avignon" threat implies that the Vatican's ability to operate as an independent sovereign state is contingent upon its alignment with the American security umbrella.

Vatican officials, particularly those within the Secretariat of State, have reportedly interpreted this as a warning that the United States could use its "military power to do whatever it wants" to restrict the Holy See's diplomatic reach. This could include the seizure of Church assets, the restriction of papal travel, or the use of intelligence capabilities to undermine the internal governance of the Church. The historical reference also hints at a deeper, more cynical view of the American-born Pope Leo XIV. By reminding the Nuncio of a time when the French king "owned" a French pope, the administration was subtly suggesting that they expect a similar deference from an American pope. The rejection of this expectation by Leo XIV has created a paradox: the administration's attempt to use historical coercion has instead fortified the Pope's resolve to demonstrate that the Chair of Saint Peter is not, and will never be, an annex of the Department of War.

5. The Colby Doctrine: Realism and the Marginalization of Moral Authority

The emergence of what scholars are now calling the Colby Doctrine marks a watershed moment in the intersection of American power and global moral institutions. Named after Elbridge Colby,

the primary architect of the current administration's strategic posture, this doctrine represents a purified form of political realism that prioritizes material power and national interest above all other considerations. Unlike previous iterations of American realism, which often sought a veneer of moral justification or sought to align with international institutions, the Colby Doctrine is characterized by its unapologetic transactionalism. It posits that in an era of renewed great power competition, the United States cannot afford the luxury of seeking moral consensus if that consensus impedes the direct application of American military and economic might. This philosophy does not merely ignore moral authority; it actively seeks to marginalize it, viewing institutions like the Holy See as potential strategic obstacles that must be neutralized or co-opted.

5.1. The "How Many Divisions" Fallacy in the 21st Century

At the core of the Colby Doctrine lies a sentiment famously attributed to Joseph Stalin: "The Pope! How many divisions has he got?" This historical echo was palpable during the January 2026 meeting at the Department of War. The administration's approach suggests a belief that because the Vatican lacks traditional "kinetic" power—standing armies, nuclear deterrents, or significant territorial reach—its influence is ultimately ephemeral and subordinate to those who command the world's most advanced weaponry. However, this reliance on a strictly materialist definition of power may prove to be a significant strategic fallacy in the complexities of the twenty-first century. While the Holy See does not possess military divisions, it commands a different form of "division": a global network of 1.3 billion adherents and a diplomatic apparatus that functions as the world's most extensive non-state intelligence and relief network.

The Colby Doctrine assumes that military primacy allows the United States to "do whatever it wants," as allegedly stated in the meeting with Cardinal Pierre. Yet, this overlooks the reality of asymmetric influence in a post-secular world. In the digital and information age, moral authority translates into social capital and political legitimacy, both of which are essential for the long-term sustainability of any hegemon. By dismissing the Pope's "divisions," the Department of War has fundamentally miscalculated the nature of soft power. When Pope Leo XIV speaks, his words resonate not just in the pews of cathedrals, but in the corridors of power across the Global South and among the American domestic electorate. The fallacy of the new realism is the belief that force can replace legitimacy; in reality, force without legitimacy requires a constant and exhausting expenditure of resources that eventually leads to imperial overstretch.

5.2. Strategic Interests vs. Universal Values

The confrontation between Washington and Rome in 2026 is, at its most fundamental level, a clash between the pursuit of strategic interests and the defense of universal values. The

Department of War's current framework defines strategic interests in narrow, often nationalist terms—securing trade routes, maintaining military bases, and countering peer competitors like China and Russia. In this view, any moral objection that complicates these objectives is seen as a hostile act. For the Colby Doctrine, the "right" side of history is simply the side that wins. This creates a friction-filled relationship with the Holy See, which views its mission as the defense of universal values that transcend national borders and political cycles.

Pope Leo XIV's critique of "imperialist occupation" and "diplomacy based on force" is rooted in the Catholic tradition of the common good, which asserts that the interests of a single nation must be weighed against the well-being of the entire human family. This perspective is inherently at odds with a doctrine that demands the Church "take its side." To the Vatican, "taking a side" in a geopolitical conflict is a betrayal of its universal character. The Colby Doctrine attempts to force a binary choice on an institution that has spent two millennia positioning itself as a mediator. By insisting that American military power grants the U.S. the right to unilateral action, the administration has abandoned the language of values entirely, replacing it with the language of the ultimatum. This shift has not only alienated the Vatican but has also created a vacuum of moral leadership that other global actors are eager to fill. The strategic interests of the United States may be served in the short term by silencing a critic, but the long-term cost is the erosion of the moral high ground that once served as a primary force multiplier for American global leadership.

6. The Diplomacy of Absence: The Cancellation of the Semiquincentennial Visit

The most visible and damaging consequence of the burgeoning rift between the Holy See and the United States was the formal withdrawal of Pope Leo XIV from the upcoming July 2026 celebrations marking the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. In the world of high diplomacy, presence is often a form of endorsement, and absence is a potent form of protest. By opting for a diplomacy of absence, the Pope transformed a moment of national jubilation and unity into a period of profound introspection and international scrutiny. This decision was not merely a logistical change but a calculated theological and political statement that the moral price of American participation on the global stage had become too high for the Church to validate with its presence.

6.1. The Symbolism of the 250th Anniversary

The Semiquincentennial was envisioned by the administration as a restoration of the American spirit and a grand display of national continuity. Elaborate plans had been centered on Philadelphia and Washington D.C., designed to showcase the resilience of the American experiment after years of domestic polarization and shifting global tides. For the Catholic

Church in America, the visit of an American-born Pope during this milestone was meant to be the ultimate synthesis of faith and citizenship. It was to be a moment where the "Prodigal Son" returned to his homeland not as a petitioner, but as a global leader, symbolizing the maturity and influence of the American Catholic tradition.

The symbolism of a Pope from Chicago celebrating Mass on the National Mall or at Independence Hall would have provided the administration with a powerful image of moral continuity. It would have signaled that despite the rebranding of the Department of Defense to the Department of War, the American project still carried the "Mandate of Heaven" or at least the blessing of the world's most significant moral authority. The administration had counted on this optics-heavy endorsement to soften the edges of its aggressive new realism. By removing himself from this narrative, Leo XIV effectively stripped the 250th anniversary of its intended veneer of universal moral approval, leaving the celebrations to appear as a purely secular, and perhaps even militaristic, display of state power.

6.2. The Political Weight of a Papal Snub

The political weight of this snub cannot be overstated. In the history of the papacy, cancellations of such magnitude are rare and usually reserved for instances of extreme moral disagreement or security failure. For Leo XIV to cancel a visit to his own country during its greatest anniversary is a gesture of historical proportions. It serves as a public declaration that the current direction of the American state is in such fundamental opposition to the values of the Gospel that the Pope cannot even be seen to stand alongside its leaders. This creates a massive legitimacy gap for an administration that, while dismissive of soft power in private, relies on the perceived righteousness of its cause to maintain domestic support and international alliances.

Furthermore, the cancellation has global ripple effects. It provides a blueprint for other nations and international organizations to distance themselves from American initiatives without engaging in direct military or economic confrontation. The "Diplomacy of Absence" allows the Holy See to exert its influence by creating a vacuum where there was once cooperation. Without the Pope's presence, the anniversary becomes a domestic event rather than a global summit of values. It forces the American public and the international community to ask why the "First American Pope" would choose to stay away from the birth of his nation. This question alone does more damage to the "Colby Doctrine" than any formal protest could, as it highlights the isolation of a superpower that has replaced the language of shared values with the language of the ultimatum. The snub is a reminder that while the Department of War can command the seas, it cannot command the conscience of the world.

7. Lampedusa vs. Washington: Symbolic Resistance and Global Migration Policy

The decision of Pope Leo XIV to spend the fourth of July on the tiny Italian island of Lampedusa, rather than at the celebratory events in Philadelphia, represents perhaps the most sophisticated exercise of symbolic power in the history of the modern papacy. In the grammar of international relations, symbols often carry more weight than communiqués. By juxtaposing the frontier of the American Empire with the frontier of human suffering, Leo XIV did not just decline an invitation; he staged a counter-liturgy. While the United States was busy projecting an image of invulnerable sovereignty and military continuity through its 250th-anniversary parades, the Pope was refocusing the world's attention on the porousness of borders and the frailty of the human condition. This move was a direct rebuttal to the Department of War's "realist" agenda, suggesting that the true measure of a civilization is not how it projects power at its center, but how it treats the "discarded" at its periphery.

7.1. The Choice of July 4th at the Frontiers of Europe

The selection of July 4th was a masterstroke of ecclesiastical signaling. For the United States, this date is the pinnacle of its civil religion, a day where the narrative of independence, self-determination, and the triumph of the will is celebrated with religious fervor. By choosing this specific day to stand on the shores of Lampedusa—an island that serves as the primary landing point for thousands of migrants fleeing conflict in North Africa and the Middle East—the Pope effectively deconstructed the American narrative of "ordered liberty." He suggested that the independence celebrated in Washington is often built upon the systemic dependence and displacement of the Global South.

Standing before the "Gateway to Europe" memorial, Leo XIV's presence on July 4th served to remind the world that while one nation celebrates its historical liberation, millions of individuals are currently in chains of a different sort: economic desperation, the fallout of "diplomacy based on force," and the consequences of environmental degradation. The visual contrast was jarring. While American jets performed flyovers in V-formations above the Potomac, the Pope was seen praying over the wreckage of capsized dinghies. This was not an accidental scheduling conflict; it was a deliberate attempt to shame the "Gospel of Power" with the "Gospel of the Marginalized." For the American public, the image of their "Native Son" choosing a rocky Mediterranean outpost over the National Mall was a profound psychological blow to the idea of a unified American-Catholic identity.

7.2. Migrant Advocacy as a Counter-Hegemonic Tool

Beyond the mere aesthetics of the protest, Leo XIV's focus on migration serves as a potent counter-hegemonic tool against the Colby Doctrine. The Department of War views migration primarily through the lens of "securitization"—as a demographic threat, a vector for instability,

or a tactical challenge to be managed through surveillance and physical barriers. In contrast, Leo XIV treats the migrant as a sovereign person whose rights precede the rights of the state. This theological stance directly undermines the Westphalian logic that the Department of War is currently trying to radicalize. By advocating for a "global responsibility" toward the displaced, the Pope is challenging the very foundation of the "America First" realism that Colby and his colleagues champion.

This advocacy creates a strategic dilemma for the United States. As the administration seeks to consolidate its influence in a multipolar world, it finds its moral authority being eroded by a Pope who uses the plight of the migrant to highlight the "blindness of the powerful." Every time the Department of War asserts the right of the United States to "do whatever it wants," the Holy See responds with the assertion that the human family is one and indivisible. This makes the migrant the ultimate "irregular combatant" in a diplomatic war of ideas. By making migration the center of his July 4th mission, Leo XIV demonstrated that the Church's "divisions" are not found in the Pentagon's spreadsheets, but in the millions of people whose movement across borders exposes the limits of military force. The Lampedusa visit proved that in a world of high-tech deterrence, the simple act of standing with the poor remains the most effective form of subversion against an empire that has forgotten how to speak the language of mercy.

8. Ecclesiastical Sovereignty in a Multipolar World

The diplomatic rupture of 2026 has forced a global reconsideration of what it means to be a sovereign entity in a world no longer governed by a single, undisputed hegemon. For centuries, the Holy See has occupied a unique position in the international order: it is a sovereign state without a traditional population, a territorial power with almost no land, and a diplomatic player that claims authority over the souls of citizens residing within other nations. The ultimatum delivered by the Department of War represents a direct assault on this "ecclesiastical sovereignty." By suggesting that the Church must align its interests with American military power, the United States is effectively attempting to demote the Holy See from a sovereign peer to a subordinate NGO or a mere domestic religious interest group. This conflict highlights the growing tension between the universalist claims of the Catholic Church and the increasingly territorial and transactional nature of modern statecraft.

8.1. The Holy See as a Diplomatic "Third Way"

In the increasingly binary environment of 2026, where the world is being pulled between a renewed American-led bloc and an emerging Eurasian coalition, the Holy See has positioned itself as an indispensable "Third Way." This is not a position of mere neutrality, but one of "active non-alignment." Pope Leo XIV has utilized the Church's unique diplomatic status to

engage with actors that the United States has officially designated as adversaries. Whether mediating back-channel communications with Tehran or maintaining a precarious dialogue with Beijing regarding the appointment of bishops, the Vatican operates in the "grey zones" where traditional statecraft often fails.

From the perspective of the Colby Doctrine, this "Third Way" is viewed with suspicion, if not outright hostility. The Department of War's strategic logic dictates that those who are not with the United States are effectively against it. The Holy See's refusal to endorse American sanctions or to provide moral cover for "preventative" military actions is seen as a breach of the historical partnership between the West and Rome. However, for much of the Global South and neutral powers in the Indo-Pacific, the Vatican's independence is its greatest asset. By refusing to be an instrument of American foreign policy, the Church maintains its credibility as a mediator in conflicts where Western motives are questioned. The current crisis has clarified that the Holy See views its sovereignty not as a shield for its own interests, but as a platform for a universal diplomatic mission that cannot be tethered to any single capital.

8.2. Challenges to Westphalian Sovereignty in the 2020s

The 2026 confrontation also exposes the fraying edges of the Westphalian system—the 1648 framework that established the nation-state as the primary unit of international law. The Department of War's insistence that military power gives a state the right to "do whatever it wants" is a radicalized interpretation of Westphalian sovereignty, one that suggests might makes right within its sphere of influence. This "neo-Westphalianism" seeks to erase the influence of transnational actors, particularly those that claim a moral authority higher than that of the state. The Holy See, as the world's oldest and most successful transnational entity, is the primary target of this effort.

The "Avignon" threat was a calculated attempt to remind the Vatican that its territorial sovereignty over the 109 acres of Vatican City is, in the eyes of the new realism, a polite fiction that can be disregarded if it interferes with the "national security" of a superpower. By invoking a time when the papacy was physically relocated and politically captured, American officials were challenging the very idea that a religious institution can exist as a sovereign equal to a military power. This creates a dangerous precedent for international law. If the United States can unilaterally decide which sovereign entities deserve respect and which must "take a side," the entire post-war legal order collapses. Pope Leo XIV's resistance is therefore a defense of more than just the Catholic Church; it is a defense of the principle that there must be spaces in the international order—be they physical or moral—that are not subject to the dictates of military force. As we move deeper into the 2020s, the outcome of this struggle will determine whether the future of global governance is a return to a "concert of powers" based on force, or a more complex, pluralistic order where moral sovereignty still holds a seat at the table.

9. Public Perception and Domestic Political Fallout in the United States

The publication of the Colby-Pierre transcripts in April 2026 acted as a political centrifuge, spinning the American public into deeply entrenched and often volatile factions. For the first time in the nation's history, the domestic narrative of the American experiment was forced to contend with a direct, public rejection by the Roman Catholic Church—an institution that for over a century had served as a primary pillar of the American social and moral fabric. The fallout was not merely a matter of foreign policy debate; it became a domestic crisis of identity. For many, the confrontation at the Pentagon represented a necessary reassertion of national strength in a world that no longer respected traditional diplomacy. For others, it was a terrifying pivot toward a form of secular authoritarianism that threatened the very religious liberties upon which the country was founded. The ensuing weeks saw a massive shift in the domestic political landscape, characterized by grassroots mobilization, legislative turmoil, and a fundamental questioning of the administration's "War Office" philosophy.

9.1. The Reaction of the American Catholic Laity

The American Catholic community, numbering over seventy million, found itself in the throes of an unprecedented spiritual and civic identity crisis. The election of Leo XIV, a native of Chicago and a former social worker, had been a source of immense pride for American Catholics, many of whom saw him as the ultimate realization of their "arrival" in the global Church. The revelation that their own government had allegedly threatened this "Native Son" with military and historical coercion created a profound sense of betrayal. In cities like Chicago, Boston, and New York, the reports sparked immediate and large-scale protests. Catholic workers' movements and lay organizations, which had previously been divided along partisan lines, found a rare moment of unity in their condemnation of the Colby Doctrine.

However, the reaction was far from monolithic. A significant segment of the Catholic laity, particularly those aligned with the "National Conservative" movement, defended the administration's stance. These groups argued that the Pope's "State of the World" address was a partisan intervention in American security interests and that the Department of War was merely doing its duty by ensuring that religious sentiment did not undermine national survival. This internal schism led to a visible fracture within parishes and dioceses. In some instances, "Patriot Masses" were held to support the administration's military posture, while other congregations organized "Vigils for the Vicar," emphasizing the Church's independence from state control. This domestic Catholic civil war served to highlight the limits of the administration's attempt to use Leo XIV as a symbol of American influence; instead of a unifying figure, the Pope became a mirror reflecting the deep ideological divisions of the 2026 American public.

9.2. Congressional Responses and the Question of Executive Overreach

The legislative response to the Pentagon summons was swift and polarized. Within days of the leak, members of the Congressional Catholic Caucus and various civil liberties advocates called for immediate oversight hearings. The central point of contention was whether the Under Secretary of War had exceeded his constitutional authority by making what appeared to be military threats against a sovereign religious state. Critics in the Senate argued that the invocation of the Avignon Papacy was not a rhetorical flourish but a clear signal of an intent to use executive power to interfere with the free exercise of religion and international diplomatic norms.

The discourse quickly escalated from calls for transparency to discussions of impeachment. Articles were drafted by opposition members citing "high crimes and misdemeanors," specifically targeting the use of the Department of War's resources to extort a religious leader. The administration's supporters in Congress countered by framing the controversy as an issue of "executive privilege" and "national security confidentiality." They maintained that the Pentagon had a duty to address any international actor—including the Holy See—whose rhetoric might jeopardize the safety of American troops or the success of current operations.

This congressional deadlock further eroded public trust in the newly renamed "War" establishment. The debate over Section 9 of the National Defense Act, which had allowed for the rebranding of the Department, became a focal point for broader concerns about executive overreach. For many Americans, the Colby-Pierre incident was the "canary in the coal mine," suggesting that a government willing to threaten the Pope with "military power" would be equally willing to use that same power to silence domestic dissent. The political fallout effectively stalled the administration's legislative agenda for the remainder of the spring, as the nation's attention remained fixed on the unfolding drama between the White House and the Vatican. The "Diplomacy of Absence" practiced by Leo XIV found its domestic counterpart in a growing movement of "Constitutional Resistance," as citizens and legislators alike began to demand a return to the "Defense" paradigm that had governed the nation since 1947.

10. The Strategic Consequences of a Vatican-US Schism

The breakdown of relations between the United States and the Holy See is not merely a symbolic or theological dispute; it carries profound and tangible strategic consequences that threaten to reshape the global security architecture. For decades, the partnership between Washington and Rome—while often characterized by tension—served as a stabilizing force in international affairs. The Vatican's ability to act as a bridge-builder, a humanitarian coordinator, and a subtle source of human intelligence provided the United States with a unique set of non-

kinetic tools. By alienating the Holy See and attempting to coerce its compliance through the Colby Doctrine, the administration has effectively dismantled these bridges. The resulting schism has created a vacuum that is already being exploited by other global powers, leading to a significant degradation of American influence in regions where moral and social authority often outweigh military hardware.

10.1. Impact on Intelligence Sharing and Global Stability

One of the most immediate and damaging consequences of the schism is the severance of the informal but highly effective intelligence cooperation between the American state apparatus and the Vatican's global network. The Catholic Church operates what is arguably the world's most extensive human intelligence network. With priests, nuns, and lay workers embedded in the most remote and unstable regions of the globe—places where official American diplomatic or intelligence assets are often absent or mistrusted—the Church possesses a granular understanding of local dynamics that no satellite or signals intelligence capability can replicate. Historically, the Vatican has shared high-level insights regarding humanitarian crises, the rise of radical movements, and the stability of local regimes with American officials.

In the wake of the January 2026 confrontation, this flow of information has reportedly ground to a halt. The Vatican's Secretariat of State has signaled a shift toward total diplomatic discretion, which in practice means that the unique insights of the missionary clergy are no longer being leveraged to support American strategic planning. This intelligence blindness is particularly acute in sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia, where the Church's deep roots provided the United States with early warning systems for regional instability. Furthermore, the Vatican's role as a back-channel mediator has been compromised. In previous decades, the Holy See was instrumental in facilitating dialogue between the United States and states with which it had no formal relations. Without the Vatican's willingness to serve as a neutral arbiter, the United States is forced to rely on more overt and often less effective diplomatic channels, increasing the likelihood of miscalculation and conflict. Global stability is thus weakened as the connective tissue of religious diplomacy is severed, leaving the world's superpower increasingly isolated in its pursuit of security.

10.2. The Potential for a New "Holy Alliance" of Neutral Nations

Perhaps the most significant long-term strategic threat posed by the schism is the potential for the Vatican to spearhead a new Holy Alliance of neutral or non-aligned nations. As the United States adopts a more aggressive and transactional Department of War posture, a growing number of states in the Global South are seeking alternatives to the binary choice between American hegemony and the emerging Eurasian bloc. Pope Leo XIV's emphasis on active non-alignment and his critique of imperialist occupation have resonated deeply with leaders in Latin

America, Africa, and parts of the Pacific who fear being caught in the crossfire of great power competition.

This emerging bloc, coalescing around the Vatican's moral leadership, represents a third way that prioritizes international law, human rights, and ecological stability over military dominance. If the Holy See successfully positions itself as the patron of this movement, it could effectively check American influence in international bodies like the United Nations. We are already seeing the early signs of this shift: several nations that were previously reliable American allies have publicly supported the Pope's State of the World address and have joined the Vatican in calling for a renewed focus on multilateralism. This Holy Alliance is not a military threat in the traditional sense, but it is a formidable diplomatic one. It has the potential to deny the United States the moral consent it needs for its global operations, making it more difficult to form coalitions or secure basing rights in key regions. By attempting to force the Church to take its side, the Department of War may have inadvertently created a powerful new side that is dedicated to resisting the very logic of force upon which the Colby Doctrine is built. This strategic realignment suggests that in the post-secular world, the most effective resistance to a military superpower may not come from a rival army, but from a coordinated front of nations and moral authorities that refuse to be coerced.

11. Comparative Analysis: From Stalin's Divisions to Colby's Ultimatums

The confrontation of 2026 does not exist in a historical vacuum; it is the latest iteration of a recurring tension between secular military power and transnational moral authority. To understand the gravity of the Colby-Pierre exchange, one must compare it to the most famous dismissive remark in modern history: Joseph Stalin's 1935 query regarding the Pope's military divisions. While both moments reflect a realist disdain for non-material power, the context and intent of the 2026 ultimatum reveal a significant evolution in how great powers perceive and attempt to manage the Holy See. While Stalin spoke from a position of ideological atheism and revolutionary expansion, the current American administration speaks from a position of defensive hegemony and strategic desperation. This section analyzes the transition from the material realism of the Cold War to the coercive, post-secular realism of the current decade.

11.1. Comparing Cold War and Post-Secular Realism

During the Cold War, the relationship between the United States and the Vatican was characterized by a strategic alignment of convenience. Despite theological differences and the Vatican's occasional critiques of capitalism, both entities shared a common enemy in Soviet communism. In this era, American realism was tempered by the utility of the Church as a soft-power asset. The Reagan-John Paul II partnership of the 1980s was the apex of this era, where

the moral authority of the papacy was recognized as a vital force in undermining the legitimacy of the Eastern Bloc. Stalin's dismissal of the Pope's divisions was seen by Western leaders as a sign of Soviet blindness to the power of the human spirit—a blindness that the United States was happy to exploit. Realism in the twentieth century, therefore, saw moral authority as a tool to be wielded in the service of ideological victory.

In contrast, the post-secular realism of 2026 operates in a world where the primary threats are no longer unified ideological blocs but fragmented, multipolar competitors and a collapsing international order. In this environment, the Department of War views the Vatican's universalist message not as a tool against an enemy, but as a direct challenge to American unilateralism. The divisions the Pope commands today are not just spiritual; they are demographic and diplomatic. The shift from the Cold War to the present reflects a move from using the Church to fight a rival to attempting to silence the Church when it critiques the self. The Colby Doctrine represents a purified realism that has lost the ideological patience of its predecessors. It no longer seeks to harmonize with moral authority because it no longer believes in the existence of a shared moral framework that can be leveraged for national gain.

11.2. The Evolution of Coercive Rhetoric

The linguistic shift from the diplomatic niceties of the late twentieth century to the blunt ultimatums of 2026 is perhaps the most striking aspect of this comparative analysis. Throughout the era of liberal internationalism, American officials utilized a vocabulary of partnership, shared values, and human rights. Even when the U.S. and the Vatican disagreed—such as during the 2003 invasion of Iraq—the rhetoric was one of respectful dissent. The administration would frame its actions as being in the service of the very values the Church promoted, even if the Church disagreed with the methods. This allowed for a strategic ambiguity that prevented a total rupture in relations.

The 2026 ultimatum, however, represents a total abandonment of this ambiguity. The alleged statement that the United States has the power to do whatever it wants and that the Church had better take its side marks the return of the ultimatum as a primary tool of American diplomacy. This is a regression to a pre-Westphalian mode of communication, reminiscent of the demands made by medieval monarchs to the papacy. It is a rhetoric of coercion that replaces persuasion with the threat of consequence. The evolution of this language reflects a broader change in the American state's perception of its own role. By renaming the Department of Defense to the Department of War, the administration essentially signaled that it would no longer hide its intent behind defensive terminology. The rhetoric used against Cardinal Pierre is the natural byproduct of this institutional shift. It is a language of raw power that seeks to end the conversation rather than continue it. By comparing this to the past, we see that the United States has moved from a nation that sought to lead the moral consensus of the world to one

that seeks to survive in spite of it. This evolution in rhetoric is not just a change in tone; it is a change in the very soul of American foreign policy.

12. Conclusion: The Future of Faith and Force in 21st-Century Governance

The diplomatic rupture of 2026 between the United States and the Holy See serves as a definitive marker for the end of the post-Cold War era and the beginning of a far more fractured, coercive global order. The confrontation at the Department of War was not merely a clash of personalities or a momentary lapse in diplomatic protocol; it was the inevitable collision of two incompatible visions for the future of human governance. On one side stands the Colby Doctrine, a manifestation of a radicalized American realism that views military primacy as the ultimate and only source of international legitimacy. On the other stands the moral sovereignty of Pope Leo XIV, who has utilized his unique position as the first American pontiff to challenge the very foundations of the power structures that birthed him. This schism has stripped away the pretenses of the liberal international order, revealing a world where the distinction between secular might and moral authority is no longer a matter of quiet negotiation, but of open, high-stakes conflict.

The "New Avignon" threat, while framed by the Department of War as a strategic necessity to ensure national security, has arguably become one of the greatest self-inflicted wounds in the history of American foreign policy. By attempting to force the Church into a subordinate role, the administration has inadvertently validated the Pope's critique of "imperialist occupation" and "diplomacy based on force." The cancellation of the papal visit to the United States' 250th-anniversary celebrations and the Pope's subsequent journey to Lampedusa on July 4th provided the world with a stark visual dichotomy: a superpower celebrating its historical independence while simultaneously attempting to curtail the independence of the world's oldest diplomatic institution. This loss of moral high ground cannot be easily recovered by the deployment of carrier strike groups or the advancement of defense technologies. It represents an erosion of the soft power that once allowed the United States to lead by inspiration rather than by ultimatum alone.

Furthermore, the strategic fallout of this crisis demonstrates that in a post-secular world, religious and moral institutions remain potent geopolitical actors. The assumption that the Pope's lack of "divisions" renders him irrelevant in a hard-power struggle has been proven false by the emergence of a new "Holy Alliance" of non-aligned nations and the severance of vital intelligence and humanitarian networks. The Department of War's narrow focus on kinetic capability has blinded it to the reality that legitimacy is a force multiplier. Without the moral consent of global civil society, the exercise of military power becomes increasingly costly,

isolating, and ultimately unsustainable. The internal domestic turmoil within the United States, particularly among the Catholic laity and within the halls of Congress, further illustrates that the American public is deeply uneasy with a government that views faith as a tactical obstacle to be overcome.

As we look toward the remainder of the twenty-first century, the relationship between faith and force will continue to be a primary fault line in global governance. The 2026 rupture suggests that the Westphalian model of absolute state sovereignty is being challenged not just by rival states, but by a renewed demand for universal ethical standards that transcend national borders. The Catholic Church, under the leadership of Leo XIV, has demonstrated that it is willing to risk institutional "captivity" rather than compromise its mission to stand with the marginalized and the displaced. This suggests that the future of governance will not be decided solely in the War Rooms of superpowers, but in the peripheral spaces—like Lampedusa—where the human cost of geopolitics is most visible.

In the final analysis, the "New Avignon" crisis is a warning to all great powers that the pursuit of total hegemony is a path to moral and strategic isolation. While the United States may currently possess the military power to "do whatever it wants," the events of 2026 have shown that it does not possess the power to do so without consequence. The enduring authority of the Holy See, which has survived empires, revolutions, and previous "captivities," serves as a reminder that temporal force is fleeting, while the claims of conscience are permanent. The path forward for the United States will require a fundamental reassessment of the Colby Doctrine and a return to a diplomacy that recognizes that true security is built on the foundation of justice, not the barrel of a gun. The struggle between Rome and Washington is far from over, but the line has been drawn: the world of 2026 is no longer a place where the spirit will quietly bow to the sword.

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US Strategic Interests
DIPLOMACY OF ABSENCE
MILITARY PRIMACY
REALPOLITIK
MORAL SOVEREIGNTY